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CRITICAL NOTE

THE FUNCTION OF HISTORY IN THEOLOGY

In the *Hibbert Journal* for January, 1907, Professor Lovejoy of St. Louis makes a vigorous protest against what he calls "the entangling alliance of religion and history." It is indicative of the revolutionary spirit of the article that the criticisms passed upon the historical character of the Christian religion as it has been, are put into the mouth of "a visitor from another planet." This imaginary critic, in complete abstraction from the social situation in which the Christian religion has developed, is filled with wonder that a religion claiming universal validity should be so intimately bound up with particular facts of history.

Now it may be granted that the discussion of this topic of the relation of theology to history is most timely, and that the article referred to suggests very forcibly how great a mistake it is, even from the standpoint of apologetics, for the theologian to take up a position which he would be required to abandon in order even to face fairly the questions of historical criticism. But the writer does not give sufficient consideration to the question *why* the historical has occupied so central a place in the Christian religion, *why* it has been felt to be so essential to it. Considerable pains are taken to describe the *process* whereby the "entangling alliance" in question grew up, but the question of the *function* of the historical in the religion and theology of the Christian is scarcely discussed, except in a negative way. How the appeal to the historical has hindered faith is ably set forth, but how it has helped religion is scarcely touched upon. And when it is suggested that the life and personality of Jesus are more useful religiously when taken as poetry than when regarded as historical, one cannot but feel that the Christian consciousness will almost universally protest against so extreme a position.

One would suspect that Professor Lovejoy's primary interest is in the philosophical rather than in the historical. He contends for a place for metaphysics in theology, but says that in matters of history honest agnosticism is the logical position. He maintains that upon religious, moral, and even broadly metaphysical questions, man's inner light of reason and general experience are guides, but when specialists in history disagree, what opinion upon historical questions, he asks, can the average man hold which will be certain enough to satisfy his religious needs? If now our

author had happened to be primarily interested in history rather than in philosophy, might he not have been quite as zealous in contending for the place of the historical in Christian theology, and might he not have been expected to say that in matters of metaphysics honest agnosticism is the logical position?

What shall we say to these things? Is the anti-historical, metaphysical theologian correct, or is the anti-metaphysical, historical theologian on the right track? Or should both history and metaphysics be excluded from theology, which would then be limited to a dogmatic expression of our religious values? Or may it be that both history and metaphysics have at least an auxiliary function in theology?

The question of the function of history in religion and theology thus opens up a larger problem, viz., that of the nature of religious knowledge. In theological construction one is chiefly interested in what has religious value; in historical investigation the interest is primarily centered in the actual occurrence of alleged events. But the question here is, Are some of the values of religion located in historical matters of fact? Is the content of theology made up in whole or in part of facts, or is it composed exclusively of values? This brings up for discussion the common classification of judgments into judgments of fact (or existential judgments) and judgments of value. In entering upon this larger question, we shall leave for the moment the particular question with which we started, but after a treatment of the more general principles of religious knowledge and of theological method, the question at issue will be more easily answered.

To begin, then, with this common, elemental distinction of existential and value-judgments, examples of each may be given. The following are existential judgments, or judgments made as judgments of fact: "The rainbow is caused by the refraction of sunlight through drops of rain;" "Judas betrayed his Master;" "Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary." Examples of value-judgments are, "The rainbow is beautiful;" "Judas did wrong;" "Jesus is divine." Of these, the judgment "The rainbow is beautiful," is an aesthetic value-judgment; the judgment, "Judas did wrong" is a moral value-judgment; the judgment, "Jesus is divine," is a religious value-judgment. In the existential judgment a statement is made as to what is taken to be a fact. In the value-judgment there is a statement as to the value of the fact or object with reference to some interest, aesthetic, moral, religious, or other. It seems clear then that all judgments are either judgments of fact or judgments of value.

But while this is doubtless a very serviceable distinction, it may also be maintained that the distinction between existential and value-judgments is

not absolute but relative only. All judgments are existential. All judgments are also valuational.

In saying that all judgments are existential, our meaning is that all judgments are intended to be expressions of fact. Not all of these supposed facts have been critically or scientifically tested, but from whatever motive and upon whatever basis the judgment is made, the subject of the judgment is taken as a reality in so far as something is asserted about it, and the result of the judgment is a more completely known object or part of reality. That this is so may be shown by the fact that any judgment whatsoever, e. g., *a* is *b*, may be put into the existential form thus: That *a* is *b* is true, is real, is a fact. Thus all judgments that enter into theology, whatever else may be true of them, must be judgments of fact.

But not all facts enter into theology. Only those judgments which have direct value for the religious life are material for theology. This leads us to consider those judgments which are called religious value-judgments. It has been said above that all judgments are valuational. By this is meant that in every judgment, while the subject, being taken as something real, shows that the judgment is intended as a judgment of fact, the predicate shows the value which that subject has for the person who makes the judgment, and so the judgment is a value-judgment. For example, in the case of Peter Bell,

A primrose by a river's brim
A yellow primrose was to him,
And it was nothing more.

That is, in his judgment, "This is a yellow primrose," the predicate shows the full value of the thing for Peter Bell. But for a poet like Wordsworth that same little flower has more value; it can give him "thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears," and these values he might at least partially express in judgments. All judgments are judgments of value, but they express value for different interests. Those made under the impulse and guidance of the economic interest are economic value-judgments; those under the scientific interest, scientific value-judgments; those under the aesthetic, social, moral and religious interests are aesthetic, social, moral and religious value-judgments. These religious value-judgments then, which are none the less made as judgments of fact, are the material of theology. The content of theology is made up of facts; the content of theology is also made up of values.

What may perhaps be called the first stratum of apologetics will consist in a defense of the relative independence of these religious value-judgments. It will vindicate the right of the religious interest to express itself

in religious existential value-judgments. This, if I mistake not, is the *locus* of Kaftan's and Schultz's apologetics. But this first stratum is not the only one, as we shall see.

As has been allowed for, many of the judgments made as judgments of fact turn out upon critical examination and testing by experience, to be not facts at all, and so are no longer made as judgments at all. The question is likely to arise at any time, Will our religious value-judgments, made as judgments of fact, stand the test of criticism? Are they really judgments of fact? So long as this question is entertained and not satisfactorily answered, our religious ideas are subjective, uncertain, hypothetical. If the reply is made that these judgments are necessary to the religious life and are made as expressions of religious faith, that they are our religious evaluations rather than facts, we are landed in a dualism of fact and value which makes subjectivism chronic. This, it would seem, is the impasse into which extreme Ritschlianism is led, whenever there is an apparent contradiction between one of our religious judgments and any other judgments which we feel compelled to make.

Whenever any religious judgment is rendered subjective and questionable, we are compelled to take that judgment as an hypothesis and seek to verify it by a critical examination of all available experience which is at all pertinent. If it is verified, even to the extent of having the difficulty removed, then, under the impulse of the religious interest it can again be made as a judgment of fact; it emerges from the state of subjectivity and uncertainty into that of objective truth or real fact.

In this process of criticism and verification it will be found (and here we come within sight of the problem with which we started) that our material divides into three principal divisions, viz., metaphysical, historical, and psychological. When our religious judgments concerning God meet with difficulty in the face of our scientific or other necessary judgments, our critical procedure must be metaphysical. This does not necessarily mean that we are to employ the old metaphysical method of dogmatic a priorism, analyzing a concept and insisting that the result must be true of reality, whether in accord with experience or not; the method should be inductive, using speculative propositions as mere hypotheses, except in so far as they are verified by their harmony with all judgments which we are compelled to make. This metaphysical procedure, together with the historical and psychological to be described later, constitutes the second stratum of apologetics. It is an attempt to present Christian judgments as rational (reasonable) and involves a fusion of apologetic and systematic theology which is typically exemplified in Origen, and against which Kaftan raises a protest.

If it can be shown that Christian faith is vitally interested in the historical Jesus, then Christian theology will contain propositions concerning Jesus. Now any judgments which faith makes as religious evaluations of Jesus must be subject to historical criticism; and in so far as the judgments deal with the relation of Jesus to God, they are subject to metaphysical criticism as well. In so far as Christian faith expresses itself in judgments concerning Christian experience, such as assertions of regeneration by the Spirit of God, sanctification, etc., the criticism and verification will be necessarily psychological first, and ultimately metaphysical. Thus where dogmatic theology affirms anything about God, the second stratum of apologetic-systematic procedure will be metaphysical; where it is about Jesus, it will be primarily historical; where it is about the Holy Spirit and Christian experience, it will be psychological.

It remains to ask, Is Christian faith vitally concerned with the historical Jesus? Professor Lovejoy would answer, No. The voice of the Christian consciousness in the past and present, it seems to me, would answer, Yes. To be sure, if we may recognize degrees of importance, the *main* thing in Christian theology is the Christian view of God, rather than the Christian view of Jesus. And while it must be admitted, that we get our characteristic Christian view of God by regarding his character and attitude toward us as being revealed to us in the spirit and life of Jesus, still this view of God has come to have a very definite content; our Christian God is a God of holiness and love. And it may be asserted that if we could keep this Christian faith in God absolutely unimpaired, we should have a basis for practically all of the more essential elements of Christian faith and theology, including the postulate of personal immortality, even if we were forced to lose faith in the historical Jesus. To this extent Professor Lovejoy's contention is no doubt justified. But this is just the question. If we were to lose faith in Jesus, would our Christian view of God and faith in him remain unimpaired? I think not. It is a distinct support to our faith to know that the God whom we need to believe in, if we are to live the best moral and religious life, is the God Jesus believed in, the God whose reality his moral and religious nature affirmed, the God by faith in whom his moral and religious life was sustained. We are helped by this because we hold Jesus to be the best that has come into human experience; morally and religiously, he is the highest we know. Therefore we attach great value to his essential affirmations in the moral and religious sphere. Christian faith is discipleship to Jesus. The authority of Jesus in morals and religion, not the authority which coerces and burdens and crushes, but the authority which we can fall back upon in our time of spiritual need, the authority

which sustains and strengthens and inspires—this is what gives to the Christian view of Jesus its place in faith and in theology. It fortifies us in the faith which we need in order to live at our best, to know that this is the faith which Jesus had, whose life was the best—the faith without which he could not have lived as he did. Our faith in the historical Jesus sustains our faith in the Christian God and in Jesus' own gospel of eternal life. If this Christian belief concerning Jesus is challenged, it can be defended, not by calling attention to the relative independence of the religious value-judgment or of Christian faith, but only by a process of historical criticism which shall be *absolutely honest*. It is a part of our faith in Jesus that he will stand this test.

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